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ABSTRACT

Classroom practitioners need to move their attention away from the technological and logistical competencies required for audio conferencing (AC) to the required communicative competencies in order to advance their skills in handling the psychodynamics of audio virtual classrooms which include audio alone and audio with graphics. While the technology is new, its associated human interaction issues are not, and if these issues are not handled competently, AC will exist as an under-developed technology in an inferior partnership with computer conferencing. Audio classrooms present three initial conditions: (1) reduced cue load, i.e., less non-verbal information is available; (2) distance is psychological as well as geographic; and (3) temporal immediacy is a given, but contextual immediacy cannot be taken for granted. Three conditions are needed for implementation: (1) audio classrooms have to be in context, i.e., integrated into the whole range of course learning and teaching activities; (2) an informal environment is needed where students feel safe enough to share tentative ideas; and (3) participants need to be time-aware, but not time-constrained. In AC there is a need to focus on people and productivity; feel the delight of academic exploration and discovery; see the AC environment as presenting opportunities; use the ideas and strategies of communications theorists; and develop more sophisticated definitions of interactive competence. (Contains 7 references.) (ALF)

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Communicative Competence in Audio Classrooms: A position paper for the CADE 1991 Conference

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The time has come for us to move our attention from the technological and logistical competencies required for audio conferencing (AC) to the required communicative competencies. We need this move if we are to advance our skills in handling the psychodynamics of audio virtual classrooms. The technology has been new, but its associated human interaction issues are not: if these issues are not handled competently, I believe that AC will exist as an under-developed technology in an unjustifiably inferior partnership with computer conferencing. In this paper I'm using the term audio classrooms to include audio alone and audio with graphics; the interaction issues are the same for both contexts.

Audio classrooms present learners and teachers with three initial conditions. The first given condition is the reduced cue load; that is, we have less non-verbal information available about the other participants. But not all forms of body-based communication are lost. Argyle lists nine types of non-verbal signals (Argyle 1988), one of which is "non-verbal vocalizations", those sounds which are interpreted as speech, or as expressions of emotion, or as expressions about the speaker. Our voices are known to be leakier than our faces in terms of our ability to control our expressions of feeling, so we can treat this fact as an advantage for AC. The second presenting condition is distance: geographic distance between people is a given, but psychological distance is not. The third presenting condition is immediacy: temporal immediacy is a given (we speak in real time; the jargon word is synchronous), but contextual immediacy cannot be taken for granted. Unless we really work at it, the AC environment can feel pressured for lack of time or lacking the dynamic ebbs and flows that are so essential for good interaction.

How do we avoid using these presenting conditions as excuses for poor psychodynamics? How do we improve our communicative competence to establish contextual immediacy and psychological closeness,to use the leakiness of the voice, and not allow synchronicity to become a tyranny? I believe that we must establish three implementation conditions : in-context, informality and in-timeness. Let us look briefly at each of these conditions.

Conditions needed for implementation

1. In context conditions

Audio classrooms have to be in-context, that is, their functions must be integrated into the whole range of course learning and teaching activities, not appearing like a frill or an add-on. There are various ways of achieving this integration. (i) by linking what the learners do in their AC class with their work done independently before the class , or with a small group of peers. AC classrooms do allow for various combinations of people and functions (Burge & Howard 1990). Whole class discussions, with and without the teacher being present, should show more sophisticated and critical treatments of information that was worked on before the class. (ii) by creating the openness and

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safety for students to talk about their new learnings in the contexts of their own lives. (iii) by balancing the use of information delivery technologies and dialogue technologies. The telephone is not the delivery medium for lecture type information ; use audio cassettes or print material for delivery and keep phone times for lively dialogue.

Regarding the reduced cues that affect the sense of context and make it more difficult to interpret the signals of liking, dominance, power and responsiveness (Mehrabian 1970) : speakers and listeners can be clued and trained so that they recognise in others and produce for themselves a range of non-verbal vocalizations (and avoid the Great Canadian Monotone). Prosodic signals, that is, the pitch, loudness and timing changes that punctuate language, synchronizing signals, for example lowered pitch to indicate the end of the message, and the paralinguistic expressions of emotion and attitude, for example, loudness, speed and tone of voice, are always present in speech: we just have to be sensitive enough to 'hear' them. The non-verbal context can be made as rich and diverse as its lexical context (Knapp 1980).

2. Informal conditions

Audio classroom members should be informal but not irresponsible. Their communicative ecology will be conditioned to a large extent by the verbal and non-verbal expressions of feeling and relationship that accompany the content information in every message. So it is crucial to create an environment comfortable enough for students to feel safe enough to bounce around tentative ideas, share sensitive information, and be themselves. An alert group of AC participants can gain as much skill for handling the relational dimensions of dialogue as they can for handling its cognitive dimensions.

The tutor/teacher has to be able and willing to step back, control any urges to "perform" or keep directing the conversation when it isn't necessary, and listen more than she/he talks: listen for those silences that indicate thinking, listen for the learners to respond to each other, avoid rescues - all these basic strategies are easy to use if the tutor is self-aware and context-aware. AC demands only four key cognitive tasks of the tutor/teacher: to confirm learnings, to correct misunderstandings, to challenge students to further analysis, and to connect them to additional resources. Being responsive to learners' affective needs calls for being authentic and immediately "present", being encouraging, legitimising anxieties, and coping with the "white water rafting" conditions of skilful teaching : those "Periods of apparent calm ... with sudden frenetic turbulence" (Brookfield 1990:2). These behaviours are feasible in AC.

3. In time conditions

Participants in audio classrooms have to be time-aware, not time-constrained; be in time, not out of time. We have already noted the synchronous nature of audio talk - a real advantage for maintaining creative energies when managed well. But how often have you heard teachers and moderators allow synchronicity to become a tyranny and cut short a good discussion because they "ran out of time"? Or, equally as bad, how often have you felt the heavy blanket effect of a moderator (unburdened by the self awareness that he/she is being intrusive) who insists on controlling the directionality of responses? These are examples of communicative incompetence.

"In time" also means the nurturing of the ebbs and flows, the rhythms that are present in speech and learning. It means too using playful time, productive time, critical time, reflective time, speculative time and contemplative time. It is possible to create and maintain these 'times' in AC, synchronicity not withstanding. The timing of the tutor's arrival into class is another key dimension - when and why she/he arrives is as critical to the class process as when and why she/he leaves. So we also have to think of roles and functions of people within varying kinds of real time. Time in AC has to be valued as a commodity, as it is valued by adults in their other life roles.

Many specific learning and teaching strategies for competent AC participants have been explored (for example, Burge & Howard 1990; Burge, Norquay & Roberts 1987; Carver & MacKay 1986), but this paper is not the place to list them in detail.

Conclusion

How may we sum up what is required for AC communicative competence, for in context, informal and in time audio classrooms?

Focus on people and productivity. Use energy for showing commitment to people and feeling the delight of academic exploration and discovery. Forget any urges toward public performance and sustained control of an audience. See the AC environment as presenting opportunities, not restrictions. Go beyond the limits of our present knowledge; use the ideas and strategies of communications theorists (eg, Trenholm 1986). Be prepared, in short, to develop more sophisticated definitions of interactive competence.

Audio classrooms will be around for a very long time, and some students and teachers actually prefer the sound and synchronicity of AC dialogue to the silence and asynchronicity of computer conferencing.

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